

# **The Platformization of Consumer Culture: A Theoretical Framework**

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## **Abstract**

This special issue, together with this position paper that accompanies it, aims at providing a comprehensive framework to address this issue, introducing and theorizing the concept of platformization of consumer culture. The overarching scope of this essay is to discuss what is distinctive of the process of platformization in relation to consumer culture (and research); what are its most important aspects, its critical controversies, its innovative dimensions and main risks. Accompanying this positional essay are the seven exceptional contributions that compose the special issue, which we believe will come to represent a pivotal reference in the quest to address this phenomenon. These showcase the manifold empirical, semantic and methodological dimensions of this emergent phenomenon, concurring to define the key dimensions that identify, describe, and explore the ways in which consumer culture has been “platformized,” from the perspective of consumer culture theory. Specifically, we identify four key “tensions” characterizing the platformization of consumer culture: *datafication vs liquification*; *standardization vs ephemerality*; *interaction vs mediation*; *immateriality vs materiality*.

Like many other social practices, in the last decade consumer culture has been invested by a process of *platformization*. A variety of digital platforms have become key mediators of consumer processes: this has significantly affected how people get to access consumer goods, how they discuss them, how they exchange them, and how value is created around them. Thus, there is a necessity to address the specific nature of this process as it pertains to consumption practices, building on the specialized literature across critical media and communication studies, sociology and other related disciplines that have begun to address platformization as a key social, cultural and economic dimension across different geographic areas and economic sectors.

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## **The platformization of consumer culture: framing the issue**

In the contemporary digital era, most consumer activities play out on digital platforms and, to some extent, have been appropriated by them (Cochoy et al. 2017; Cochoy et al., 2020). Social media (Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, etc.) constitute the paradigmatic example of this phenomenon. On the one hand, social media platforms are the first place people go to when they want to find information about a product or brand, (Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Tuten and Solomon, 2017), express opinions about them (Van Laer et al., 2019), interact with other like-minded consumers (Brodie et al., 2013), showcase their social status (Bainotti, 2023), surveil other consumers (Marwick, 2012; Duffy and Chan, 2019), protest against corporations (Roux and Izberk-Bilgin, 2018; Wood, 2021), or simply kill time (Murphy et al., 2023). On the other hand, platforms provide users with free tools to engage in these activities, and thereby produce creative content, create

communities and express their identities (Marwick, 2015). As digital objects, platforms are explicitly engineered to *datafy* consumer experiences and cultural production (Van Dijk and Poell, 2013), in order to serve the economic regime that Shoshana Zuboff framed as *surveillance capitalism* (Zuboff, 2015). This, Zuboff maintains, is a “digital order that thrives within things and bodies, transforming volition into reinforcement and action into conditioned response” (Zuboff, 2019: 378). As a result, digital platforms might be seen as social environments whose distinctive aspect is to be an enclosed space whereby to organize and coordinate the encounter of social relations among users, and their datafication (Gandini, 2021). In so doing, they constrain user activities into standardized patterns of action, in order to make their behaviors predictable for business purposes (Zuboff, 2019). Despite the relevancy of this phenomenon, consumer and marketing research has so far addressed it sporadically and unsystematically; more empirical research and ad-hoc theoretical conceptualization is needed, we contend, to grasp what is distinctive of this process in relation to consumption. In our opinion, this is a notable gap, since this is not one of the many and (possibly) interesting topics to study regarding digital platforms, but we maintain it is *the* topic that most centrally concerns platforms and their success, these being at once commercial spaces of consumption as well as objects of consumption per se that are (coherently) underpinned by specific consumeristic logics.

To address this gap, in the next sections we present a theoretical conceptualization of the process of platformization of consumer culture, that we intend primarily as a process of digitization of the *consumer imaginary*, shaped by the technical architecture of and participatory cultures inhabiting digital platforms and characterized by four conceptual tensions: *datafication vs liquification*, *standardization vs ephemerality*, *interaction vs mediation*, *immateriality vs materiality*.

### **Platforms and Platformization**

Platforms are everywhere today, to the point that - some scholars argue (Plantin et al. 2018; Van Dijk, 2021) - they constitute the very backbone of the World Wide Web. As Helmond (2015) contends, social media platforms ‘colonized’ the open web by extending their infrastructures into regular websites (by means of Like buttons, Sharing buttons, APIs, etc.), thus making their data ‘platform-ready’. Consider for example that we rarely access and navigate the web directly; usually, in order to do that we need the mediation of a search engine operating platforms like Google or (Microsoft) Bing. Also, consider that, after Google, the three most visited websites in the world in 2023 are YouTube, Facebook, and Pornhub, yet other platforms (WeAreSocial, 2023). But what are digital platforms then? Usually, when we speak of platforms we refer to big tech companies (like Meta, Amazon, Apple, Uber, Deliveroo, Airbnb, etc.) that not only dominate contemporary digital capitalism, but, to some extent, invented it, by setting (and imposing) the rules of its functioning (Arvidsson, 2019). Srnicek defines platforms as “digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact; they position themselves as intermediaries that bring together different users: advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers and physical objects (2017: 48)”. This intermediation role is far from being ‘neutral’ (Gillespie, 2010); in fact, it is exactly this positioning that makes platforms dominant in the digital capitalism landscape. Digital platforms do not merely provide a common ground where users meet and create value, but rather are ad-hoc ‘tools’ explicitly designed to extract data from the very same users they host. As said, this systematic process of data extraction and accumulation stands at the very core of the business model of digital platforms, which use data for disparate lucrative scopes, such as: selling them to a plethora of third parties (data broker, data vendor, data analyst, etc.) (Van der Vlist and Helmond, 2021); clustering and identifying specific consumer segments or audiences (to be sold to brands, corporations, marketing agencies, etc) (Arvidsson and Bonini, 2015); feeding recommendation algorithms that push users targeted advertising (Dong et al., 2023); developing AI products and services (e.g. face recognition, chatbots, virtual assistants, self-driving cars, etc.) (Mühlhoff, 2022); increasing the reputation of the platform itself and so its financial value (Arvidsson, 2016).

Alongside their economic functioning and importance, we have their cultural and social impact. A key concept to understand the impact of platforms on society and culture at large is *platformization*. Studies on ‘platformization’ are gaining traction in the last few years, covering different kinds of topics: *platformization of society* (Van Dijk et al., 2018), *platformization of education* (Kumar et al., 2019), *platformization of labor* (Gandini, 2021), *platformization of migration* (van Doorn and Vijay, 2021), *platformization of news* (Hase et al., 2022), *platformization of care* (Kluzik, 2022), *platformization of love* (Bandinelli and Gandini, 2021), *platformization of the public sphere* (Smyrnaio, and Baisnée, 2023) - just to name a few. Yet, for the purposes of this essay, the most interesting strand of research on platformization is that on culture and cultural production.

Poell et al. (2019), building on Helmond (2015), define platformization as “the penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks of digital platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life”, as well as “the reorganization of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms” (2019: 5). This definition builds on the assumption that platforms constitute, first and foremost, “data infrastructures that facilitate, aggregate, monetize, and govern interactions between end-users and content and service providers” (Poell et al., 2022: 5). With platformization, Poell et al. (2022) contend, platforms become new kinds of cultural institutions that create markets and act as intermediaries and providers of legitimacy for actors involved in the context in which they operate. Within this theoretical framework, scholars provide many concrete examples of this phenomenon (Poell et al., 2022; Rama et al., 2023). For instance, O’Meara (2019) and Bishop (2019), respectively on Instagram and YouTube, explore the practices through which communities of influencers manage to manipulate platforms’ algorithms in order to make their posts more visible. Bonini and Gandini (2019), through their ethnography of Spotify, observe that algorithmic and human curators are supplanting traditional cultural intermediaries to become new music gatekeepers. Rama et al. (2023) show how, through algorithmic recommendations, the process of platformization of adult and sexual content is directly ingrained in the cultural construction of gender and sexual identities. These examples concur to confirm what argued by Nieborg and Poell and, relatedly, Poell et al. (2022), who maintain that platforms make cultural commodities become “fundamentally contingent”, that is a constant flow of modular contents which are “continuously reworked and repackaged, informed by datafied user feedback” (2018: 4275).

As specified in Duffy et al.’s (2019), the emergent strand of research on platformization principally focuses on the cultural industries, and thus, on how cultural production is affected by platforms’ logics in such ecosystems. Less attention, instead, has been paid to the platformization of culture intended in an *anthropological sense* (Geertz, 1973), that is, as a complex set of values, symbols, identities, discourses, and narratives emerging from the interactions between platforms’ technicalities and the everyday digital practices of platform users. Few scholars reflected on how platforms’ affordances shape and are shaped by users’ everyday cultural practices and imaginaries (Van Es and Poell, 2020; Sörum and Fuentes, 2023); far few addressed this issue in the realm of consumption, trying to explore and theorize the relations between platforms’ logics and consumers digital cultural production around brands, products, and services (e.g. Caliandro and Anselmi; 2021; Airoidi and Rokka, 2022; Schöps et al., 2020, 2022). To fill this gap, it is useful to turn to the consumer culture theory (CCT) tradition and see how it conceives cultural production as well as how it addresses it in relation to digital media (in general) and platforms (more specifically).

### **Consumer culture, digitization, and platforms**

In their 2005 seminal article ‘*Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty years of research*’, Arnould and Thompson define consumer culture as an “interconnected system of commercially produced images, texts, objects that groups use – through the construction of overlapping and even conflicting practices, identities, and meanings – to make collective sense of their environments and to orient their members’ experiences and lives” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: 869). Almost twenty years

later, arguably platforms have taken on the role of re-mediating the meanings and social relations entrenched in this process, adding to that the complex technical layer of algorithms and metrics that constitute its infrastructural backbone. Therefore it becomes all the more important to try to understand if and to what extent consumer culture, based on this definition, becomes *platformized*, and provide a systematic conceptualization of this process.

Since its start, CCT has addressed the question of ‘digitization’ (Hagberg and Kjellber, 2020; Rokka, 2021) as the process of reconfiguration of markets brought about by digital technologies, whereby cultural production is no longer centralized within traditional market and media institutions (e.g., brands, marketing and advertising companies, mass media, etc.), but rather dispersed within an heterogeneous network of stakeholders (e.g., regular consumers, influencers, brand communities, brand managers, software developers, etc.) (Dolbec and Fisher, 2015) that coalesce and act in innovative (Von Hippel, 2005; Füller et al., 2007) and unexpected ways (Jankins, 2006; Parmentier and Fischer, 2015). To this purpose, consider the extensive CCT research on prosumption (Ritzer, 2014) and how this leads to novel processes of value co-creation between consumer communities and brands (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Schau et al., 2009; Skålén et al., 2015). In this regard, CCT scholars have shed light on the key (and active) role of digital media and devices in shaping consumer processes of construction of identity, social relations, ideologies, and worldviews (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010; Belk, 2013; Canniford and Bajde, 2015; Arvidsson and Caliendo, 2016; Hoffman and Novak, 2018; Sörum and Fuentes, 2023.). Contextually, it has been shown that blogs function as ‘megaphones’ through which ordinary fashion enthusiasts can “acquire an audience without the institutional mediation historically required” (McQuarrie et al., 2013: 136); that branded Instagram selfies jeopardize ‘official’ brand images (Rokka and Canniford, 2016); that networks of food pictures and posts trigger consumers’ desire (Kozinets et al., 2017); that micro-targeted ads stimulate consumers’ self-reflection, pushing them to resist automation and surveillance (Leung et al. 2018; Ruckenstein and Granroth; 2020); that car sharing apps deteriorate communitarian bonds among consumers and affective connections with brands (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012); that recommendation algorithms shape music taste (Airoldi, 2021).

Yet, for how valuable all these contributions are, they do not address directly and organically the question of platformization, focusing more generally, and from different theoretical perspectives, on the whole spectrum of the digital (Internet, social networking sites, blogs, apps, algorithms, etc.). Only quite recently, CCT scholars started to empirically and theoretically engage with this notion. Specifically, some contributions investigate the role of platforms as *intermediaries* between different market actors (Boudreau, 2017; Täuscher and Laudien, 2018) as well as the kind of value platforms offer to companies and customers (Gielens and Steenkamp, 2019). For example, Perren and Kozinets (2018) study how platforms reconfigure economic and social exchanges among peer-to-peer networks of providers and recipients and outlined four ideal types of platforms, which differ according to the kind of value they provide: “Forums connect actors, Enablers equip actors, Matchmakers pair actors, and Hubs centralize exchange” (Perren and Kozinets, 2018: 20). Moreover, Kozinets et al. (2021) reflect on how platform affordances empower consumers, by ethnographically studying the Reclame Aqui platform - (the largest Latin American digital venue for consumer feedback). They come to the conclusion that the socio-technical architecture of Reclame Aqui empowers consumers insofar as it offers them a “discovery affordance that informs choice, a narration affordance that provides them with an opportunity to voice complaints, a contact affordance through which they can seek justice, and a meta-voice affordance that includes their evaluation in an important reputation rating” (Kozinets et al., 2021: 447). Finally, Wichmann et al. address the complex the phenomenon of *platformisation of brands*, which consists in a process through which brands transform themselves into ‘commercial hubs’ that “transcend the specific product brand by including third-party complementary products, services, and content to occupy the broader category space and address consumer needs more holistically” (2022: 110; Zhu and Furr,

2016). The hegemonic power of digital ‘aggregator platforms’ (like Zalando, Amazon, Alibaba, etc.) represents a threat to brands, since those platforms “diminish brand differentiation and foster price competition by featuring many similar or even identical offerings at different prices from competing suppliers” (Wichmann et al., 2022: 109-110). To contrast such a threat, Wichmann et al. provide guidelines to transform brands into ‘brand flagship platforms’, that is, assemblages of different ‘building blocks’ that allow companies to provide ad hoc kinds of values to different market segments. For example, Nike is a ‘platform brand’ insofar it offers, among other things, an online shop for selling shoes and a run club (Nike Run Club) aggregating a community of running enthusiasts; in this way Nike increases both its *economic* and *liking* value with customers (Cova, 1997). However, as mentioned earlier, this strand of research focuses more on processes of value creation among different kinds of platforms’ users, rather than on the processes of cultural production embedded within the technical infrastructure and logics of platforms (Caliandro et al., 2024-forth). Again, the gap here seems to lay in the necessity to approach the concept of culture in an anthropological sense and consumer culture in its relationship with platformization, which requires more exploration from an empirical point of view and better conceptual framing from a theoretical point of view.

### **Platforms dimensions and consumer culture: concentration, fragmentation, contingency**

There are, we argue, three distinctive dimensions of platforms that are useful to start framing the process of platformization in consumer culture: *concentration*, *fragmentation*, and *contingency*.

On the one hand, platforms produce personalized social environments whereby individual consumers can, as said, engage in a variety of social activity related to the consumption object of their interest: put differently, they *concentrate* user behavior in a single space. This concentration has one key purpose: behavioral prediction (Zuboff, 2019; Mühlhoff, 2020). Yet, this also extends the nature and kind of prosumption practices that are typical of digital consumer settings, as well as facilitates practices of response, adaptation, and even resistance to it (see Yu et al., 2022). Studying entrepreneurial craft markets, Fischer and Scaraboto (2023, this issue) illustrate an example of this concentration, arguing that platformization redistributes the jurisdiction over some of craft workers’ practices, as well as alters the material-spatial co-location and the temporality of their practices. In so doing, prosumers engage in what the authors call “platformance,” that is, a kind of adaptation in response to changes in their “practices bundle” which helps them changing certain market elements, but also increases their platform dependence.

Paying attention to bundles of practice and the connective tissue that ties them is particularly relevant as it implies that, when looking at platformized consumer cultures and practices, our focus cannot be limited to the sole domain of platforms but demands a holistic (and non-dualistic) approach, which looks at the role of platform practices related to consumption within and beyond platforms themselves. Denegri-Knott et al. (2023 this issue: 1) describe this quite effectively while arguing about ‘platformised possessions’ - referring to “pins, messages, photos, videos and playlists hosted on digital platforms” (ibid.) - as a form of relational labor, that is unpaid and serves the benefit of platforms as much as extolling emotional engagement from consumers. Furthermore, this contribution represents an opportunity to extend the definition of platformization of consumer culture to the field of emotions and feelings and apply it to processes of possession work.

Germane to concentration is the *fragmentation* of consumers taking place on platforms, as a result of their activity as well as of the socio-technical setup of platform infrastructures. Following on the notion of brand community (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001), consumer research has shown that on

social media platforms this takes most commonly the form of a brand public, whereby interaction is driven by a continuous focus of interest and mediation and structured by way of an affective dimension (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016). Platformization extends this process in the direction of a more organized, coordinated, and standardized production of publics: an example of this process is the rise of *memetic* forms of interaction around brands and consumption objects (Caliandro and Anselmi, 2021), whereby templates enable users to express their vernacular creativity while at the same time standardizing and optimizing user engagement and its datafication. Schöps et al. (2023, this issue), illustrate this very effectively by looking at participatory logics in the context of fitness body culture on Instagram. Building upon meme theory, they show “the memetic logics of participation that manifest in and derive from an interplay between consumers and affordances” (ibid.), suggesting that consumers follow both context-specific and platform-afforded memetic logics of participation in cultural production, in an interplay between consumers and platform affordances, recursive imitation and standardized expressions of sentiment.

An innovative approach to the relationship between affordances and platformization is offered by the contribution of Ottlewski, Rokka and Schouten (2023, this issue). The authors acknowledge that the existing literature focuses mostly on corporate-governed and mainstream platforms, leaving aside platforms that are instead “created by ordinary consumers using readily available (market) tools” (ibid.). To address this gap, the paper proposes a theorization of consumer-initiated platforms and their affordances, thus offering an extended view of platformization beyond a firm-centered perspective. Furthermore, by focusing on the affordances of a specific consumer-initiated platform called Familyship.org, the authors highlight how the logics of platformization might affect one of the most intimate spheres of our everyday lives, the family, as well as choices of family formation. Interestingly, Ottlewski et al. (2023) show that despite sharing some similarities with corporate-initiated platforms, consumer-oriented platforms and their modular building block (which the authors refer to as *modularity*), contribute to “*encourage* and *inspire* users to experiment with alternative family forms, and afford a broadening and pluralization of the institution of family and of users’ identity” (ibid.). Such a perspective allows us to highlight that a certain amount of diversification can be found within processes of platformization of consumer culture, which in turn empowers consumers.

A third, distinctive dimension concerns the production, organization and monetisation of contingent consumer attention. *Contingency*, we contend, is a key aspect of platformized consumer culture because it grasps how consumer practices and attention are increasingly dependent on the ephemeral, multi-modal and ever-changing dynamics of platform interaction, and complementary to platform monetisation (Nieborg and Poell, 2018). Thanks to a variety of affordances and formats, users share their views and express their feelings in relation to consumption objects or brands in a process that is continuously changing, which also affects the cultural rankings and hierarchies attached to these consumption objects. The role of metrics and their interplay with the aforementioned memetic logic produces forms of attention-driven interaction which have the power to shape collective understandings of consumer-related phenomena. A good example of this process is given by Drenten et al.’s (2023, this issue) work on so-called ‘gunfluencers’, which shows how social media influencers invested in promoting gun-related products use a platform to tie products, consumption activities, and meanings to an ideology, engaging in a process they label as ‘curating’ a consumption ideology. This curation work, they show, is usually centered around a polarizing

issue, and builds on contingency to develop ideological narrations that engage users around their preferred topics.

Another good example of the relevance of contingency is given by the case of #cancel\_efood in Greece illustrated by Vrikki and Lekakis (2023, this issue). The success of contingent and platformised consumer activist practices suggests that, under certain conditions, these can increase the visibility of workers' struggles in a given context, and thus put pressure on specific platform players when they are to violate workers' rights. Arguing against 'consumer solutionism', that is, "the idea that consumer purchases (and politics) can be forwarded at the click of a button" (Lekakis, 2022: 14), the authors show that #cancel\_efood led to massive expressions of discontent against labor injustice, while at the same time underlining that consumer activism on social media maintains some important limitations concerning in particular the representations of online consumer power.

The notion of contingency that is intrinsic to platformisation also entails that specific attention should be paid to the temporal dimension of consumption practices and phenomena. In their contribution to this special issue, Bajde, Golf-Papez and Culiberg (2023) use archival data to trace the discursive formation of the sharing economy as an influential cultural category and investigate the role played by social movement organizations (SMOs) in such a process. Particular attention is paid to the role of SMOs in promoting platformization and shaping the emergence of markets. The perspective adopted by the authors also allows us to expand the understanding of platformization of consumer culture to the cultural dynamics, understood as discursive strategies, that shape and actualise it. Particularly, the article shows that the sharing economy category emerges "as a nexus of overlapping discursive strategies [...] through which an economy is articulated (flagging, magnifying), socially thickened (problematizing, prospecting, mobilizing) and technologized" (ibid.).

These contributions, comprehensively intended, point to the key role that consumer imaginaries play in this process, and the way these get to be platformized. We explore this aspect in the next section, through the notion of the *digital consumer imaginary*.

### **Digital consumer imaginary and platformized imaginaries**

The concept of *digital consumer imaginary* is key to understanding and grasping, on a very empirical level, how, and to what extent, consumer culture gets platformized (Caliandro et al., 2024-forth). A *digital consumer imaginary* is a form of *socio-technical imaginary*, which, as Jasanoff and Kim puts it, is a "powerful cultural resource for making sense of and enacting new technologies" (Jasanoff and Kim, 2013: 190). Scholars use the term 'socio-technical' because such 'cultural resource' is not really the product of the imaginative mind of the individual, but rather the combined product of the inherent properties of a technological device and the norms of use that society constructs around it (Schellewald, 2022). Similarly, a digital consumer imaginary is a collective way of representing consumer objects (co-created by human and non-human actors) which emerges and circulates within digital environments and functions as a cultural resource for making sense of and/or enacting consumer culture (Caliandro and Anselmi, 2021; Sörum and Fuentes, 2023). Specifically, a digital consumer imaginary is a macro-representation of a process of consumption made by a collection of micro-representations of brands, products, services (etc.), that users create by means of textual, visual, or acoustic props on digital media (Caliandro et al., 2024-

forth; Bainotti and Rogers, 2020). This assemblage of representations is kept together by the affordances of digital platforms, a condition that makes such a heterogeneous and scattered collection capable of vehiculating a common consumer discourse (e.g. about authenticity, resistance, taste, etc.) (Parmentier and Fischer, 2015; Schöps et al., 2020; Semenzin and Bainotti, 2020; Airoldi, 2021). This is, for instance, how cultural production works in *brand publics* on social media platforms (Moufahim et al., 2018). A brand public is a form of consumer collective that emerges around brands on social media, whose member's interaction is not based on direct conversations but rather on the mediation of the same digital device (e.g. #louisvuitton) - which all members use and on which their attention is focused (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016). Although disconnected, the members of a brand public are capable of creating a common imaginary (Caliandro, 2014; Giordano et al., 2018), since they are subject to the same socio-technical constraints (boyd, 2010; Rogers and Giorgi, 2023). For example, Caliandro and Anselmi (2021), studying 6 brand publics on Instagram (#starbucks, #mcdonalds, #smirnoff, #greygoose, #zara, #louisvuitton), noted that, when generating branded posts, users tend to reproduce a very repetitive and standardized visual repertoire. Drawing on this evidence, Caliandro and Anselmi elaborate the concept of *memetic brands*, which they define as “collections of branded social media posts, which derive from a standard branded template that repeats from user to user with small compositional changes at every iteration and on top of which users attach expressions of their vernacular creativity. In the process, memetic brands vehiculate a hypersignification, that is, an implicit discourse on fluid and situational consumption” (2021: 1). To similar results come Schöps et al. (2020), who, by analyzing the photos associated to the hashtag #americanapparel on Instagram, observe how users and the brand itself (implicitly) collaborate in circulating visual representations of the women's body that challenges gender stereotypes. Or, finally, consider the study of Rokka and Canniford (2016), who pointed out how selfies - the standard content *par excellence* - that consumers associated to champagne brands on Instagram (like Moët and Chandon, Veuve Clicquot and Dom Pérignon) contribute to trivialize, and thus destabilize, the image of those 'classy' brands.

When emerging on digital platforms, these digital consumer imaginaries become 'platformized', meaning they do not assume 'random forms' but rather are shaped by platforms' affordances, that is, by the mutual influence of platforms' technical infrastructures (Gerlitz and Rieder, 2018) and the digital participatory cultures (Rieder et al., 2018) populating (and using) them. The intersection of human and non-human actors, affordances and participatory cultures, in the formation of the digital consumer imaginary is already suggestive of the complexities of the platformization of consumer culture. To address such a complexity and further unpack the concept of platformization of consumer culture, in the next section we introduce the four conceptual tensions that, we argue, characterize this phenomenon: *datafication vs liquification*, *standardization vs ephemerality*, *interaction vs mediation*, *immateriality vs materiality*.

### **The platformisation of consumer culture and its tensions**

A first element that is peculiar to the platformization of consumer culture is the tension between *datafication* (Van Dijck, 2014) and *liquification* (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017), intended as the platforms' necessity to, at once, 'standardize' and 'de-standardize' consumer practices of cultural production. In fact, on the one hand platforms need to standardize consumer behaviors to more efficiently surveil them; on the other hand, they need consumer behavior to be free, unexpected in some way - to encourage users to always come back and not to abandon the platform (Caliandro et al., 2024-forth). As argued by Airoldi and Rokka (2022), datafication can be seen as the dark side



of digitization (Hagberg and Kjellber, 2020), as it reduces platforms to mere surveillance mechanisms (Darmody and Zwick, 2020) that disempower consumers by transforming every aspects of their social life into data to be sold to marketing and advertising firms (Zwick et al., 2008; Cova and Dalli, 2009; Thompson, 2019). In turn, liquification can be conceived as the empowering side of platforms, insofar as it favors ‘liquid’ forms of consumption (i.e., access-based, ephemeral, de-materialized, individualized), which “potentially emancipate consumers from social and geographical boundaries while creating value” (Airoldi and Rokka, 2022: 412). Of course, as Airoldi and Rokka make clear, these two components coexist within platform ecosystems. Consider for example how Twitter, by means of its algorithm, pushes mainstream or polarized hashtags to the trending topics inducing users to consume such content (Gruzd and Roy, 2014; Valensise et al. 2023); but also how, at the same time, fandoms (like those of One Direction or BTS) hijack the Twitter algorithm (e.g., through massive and coordinated retweeting) in order to position their ‘own personal agendas’ within the trending topics (e.g., news of concerts or anti-racist messages) (Arvidsson et al., 2016; Treré and Bonini, 2022). Building on the primary tension between datafication and liquification, we can identify another key tension pertaining to the platformisation of consumer culture: *standardization vs ephemerality*.

Standardization means that consumers’ practices are conformed to, and oriented by, the mechanisms through which platforms operate and the standards they set. The notion of standardization is useful to account for how the penetration of digital platforms and their logics (Helmond, 2015; Poell et al., 2022) has impacted the ways in which consumption is performed, imagined, and discussed. On the one hand, platforms need to standardize users’ behaviors in order to better (and more efficiently) track and convert them into data (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013). These forms of standardization create a sort of path dependency: platforms and their logics define what is deemed relevant, visible, or viral, while relegating all the rest to the threat of invisibility (Bucher and Helmond, 2017). Although resistance is possible (see e.g. O’Meara, 2019; Vrikki and Lekakis, 2023 this issue), standardization means conformity and adaptation to digital platforms and the requirements they set in terms of the practices and content deemed appropriate or successful. This kind of technical constraints fuels processes of *replication* and *imitation* (Schops et al., 2023 this issue). Several studies demonstrate how the technical infrastructure of platforms like TikTok (Zulli and Zulli, 2020; Zeng and Abidin, 2021) or Instagram (Highfield and Leaver, 2016; Caliandro and Anselmi, 2021) fosters imitative publics and memetic practices that orient users’ relations with consumer product, which in turn are more and more *mediated* by the creation, re-appropriation, and circulation of standard templates. We already mentioned the case of *memetic brands* on Instagram (Caliandro and Anselmi, 2021), in which users create and share photos of branded products by means of standard visual templates that present minimal variations from user to user, much like a classical meme works and propagate through Internet networks (Shifman, 2014). With platforms such as TikTok, sound has become a new driving template for the creation of memetic content, which has led to the popularization of audio memes (Abidin and Kaye, 2021). In these cases, standardization emerges in the replication of particular audio clips, catchphrases, or sound effects that become ‘viral’ among TikTok users. The platform’s algorithm, which promotes content using trending sounds, can further contribute to such a standardization by amplifying popular audio memes and encouraging users to participate in these trends (Klug et al., 2021). Although such memetic content production has an empowering facet, since facilitates the interaction among massive and highly dispersed networks of social media users (Rogers, 2019) - (even allowing political mobilisations - see Lee and Abidin, 2023), it, nonetheless, makes consumers’ cultural

production extremely *datafied*, and so very easy to be identified, retrieved, and manipulated by platforms' systems of surveillance (Darmody and Zwick, 2020).

Yet, notably the growing standardization of content and practices also introduces a significant element of *ephemerality* (Bainotti et al., 2021). While certain content and trends may enjoy a moment of popularity and widespread replication, they eventually fade away quickly as new trends emerge. In the case of TikTok audio memes, for instance, visual and aural templates change over time, are appropriated and reappropriated by different groups of users, and eventually become diluted, until their memetic components cease to exist (Bainotti et al., 2022). This continuous, rapid cycle of memetic behaviors and the extenuating pursuit of virality contribute to the transient nature of content, practices, and digital consumer imaginaries. Ephemerality does not necessarily lie in the type of content shared (i.e., TikTok videos do not formally disappear after a certain amount of time), but at the level of the platform's affordances and participatory culture. As a result, ephemerality expands to consumption practices as these become an integral part of a trend and an effective device to seek attention and 'go viral' through forms of display, and increasingly entail a situational component (Caliandro et al., 2024-forth). As shown by Airoidi et al. (2016) in their study of music genres on YouTube, practices of music consumption - and the role of music genres in orienting listening preferences - increasingly get tied to temporary situations, moods, and specific occasions of consumption. This is further evidenced by the practices of playlist production and consumption on Spotify (cfr. Caliandro et al., 2024-forth), where a multiplication of mood-based and situation-based curated content is accompanied by playlist composition practices by users that reflect a greater heterogeneity and 'liquidity' of consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017), suggesting that the lifespan of this kind of cultural products is potentially smaller. This is further intertwined with the rise of TikTok as an audio-based social media where rapidly mounting and disbanding trends also involve specific tunes and sounds (Radovanovic, 2022).

Cutting right across the tension between standardization and ephemerality, lies also the tension between *interaction* and *mediation*. Building on the concepts of brand publics (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016) and imitation publics (Zulli and Zulli, 2020), as well as looking at the complex social formations emerging around influencers (which combine the features of communities and publics) (Hutchins and Tindal, 2021; Drenten et al., 2023, this issue), it may be argued that the creation of social collectives on social media platforms is undertaking a process of *hybridization*. To better frame this emerging socio-cultural dynamics, Caliandro et al. coined the concept of *hybrid influencer publics*. Hybrid influencer publics are particular social formations "characterized by the coexistence of *mediation* and *interaction*, the emphasis on affective forms of communication, and the presence of a mediated form of identity" (2024-forth: n.a.). Studying the case of micro-influencers on Instagram, Caliandro et al. (2024-forth) draw a complex scenario, where influencers followers are socially disconnected and kept together by the mere mediation of a common digital device (i.e. the following button), but nonetheless, thanks to the mediation of the influencer persona (toward whom they have the same, strong affective investment) they manage to develop meaningful interactions as well as a common sense of belonging and identity. A similar case of hybridisation is described by Rosenthal and Airoidi (2023) regarding Brazilian gun-influencers on YouTube. According to the authors, the joint influence of *expressive* and *connective* affordances of the YouTube platform mediates the formation of common moral discourses and identities (2023:1) among heterogeneous publics aggregating around influencers' channels. This perspective of hybridisation between interaction and mediation could also be applied to future research aimed at

better understanding the emergence and features of digital consumer imaginaries on digital platforms.

Last but not least, while the process of platformisation of consumer culture may be seen as inherently *immaterial* (Denegri-Knott et al., 2023 this issue), we should not forget the *material* dimension this continues to entail (Fischer and Scaraboto 2023 this issue). As existing research shows, the display of material consumption represents a pivotal mechanism to gain and signal social status in the context of the social media economy of visibility (Bainotti, 2023). More specifically, when in interaction with the logic of social media platforms such as Instagram, the display of consumption becomes a productive activity, rather than an expression of wastefulness. The role of material consumption is also pivotal in fuelling the possibility to participate in, and capitalize on TikTok challenges and trends, especially those rooted in consumption such as the so-called ‘#shoehallenge’ (Caliandro et al., 2024-forth) or the ‘deinfluencing’ trend (Karimi, 2023). Therefore, the platformization of consumer culture does not exclude - nor render useless - paying attention to the material cultures that pertain to consumption practices, which maintain significant relevance. Indeed, the relationship between the platformization of consumer culture and (old and new forms of) materiality represents a potentially insightful avenue for future research on this topic.

Ultimately, while we discourage understanding the platformisation of consumer culture in terms of strict dichotomies, such datafication vs liquification, or standardization vs ephemerality (etc.), we argue that a deep and nuanced understanding of this phenomenon primarily lies at the intersections and overlapping of these dimensions. It is from these primal and basic tensions that we can see the dynamics that characterize consumer culture being deployed on digital platforms.

## **Conclusion**

With this special issue and the position paper that accompanies it, we aim at contributing to the emerging field of the platformization of consumer culture, by providing the theoretical contours of this phenomenon, as well as a rich array of conceptual and empirical investigations of its dimensions and nuances.

By combining a perspective rooted in consumer culture, embodied by Arnould and Thompson (2005), with research on the platformization of cultural production (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2019; Poell et al., 2022), we can define the platformization of consumer culture as: the progressive “penetration of the infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of platforms” (Nieborg and Poell, 2018: 2) in consumers’ everyday lives. Such a penetration influences and reorganizes the cultural practices through which consumers use objects of consumption to make collective sense of their environments and to orient their experiences and lives, across the online and offline domains (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

To operationalize this definition and empirically analyze the platformization of consumer culture in its various nuances, we introduced the notion of digital consumer imaginaries and pointed out how they become ‘platformized’. The concept of platformized consumer imaginaries points exactly at how cultural representations of brands, products and services are shaped by the entanglements of platforms’ technical infrastructures (Gerlitz and Rieder, 2018) and digital participatory cultures (Rieder et al., 2018).

The contributions of this special issue offer valuable examples of how consumer imaginaries become platformized and, more broadly, contribute to our understanding of the platformization of consumer culture in multiple ways.

Firstly, by covering various aspects of consumer culture, ranging from consumer activism (Vrikki and Lekakis, 2023, this issue) to craftwork (Fischer and Scaraboto, 2023, this issue), and featuring a wide array of actors, such as social movement organizations (Bajde et al., 2023, this issue) or gunfluencers (Drenten et al., 2023, this issue), the special issue shows how fertile and versatile the concept of platformization of consumer culture is. Embracing topics like the study of emotions (Denegri-Knott et al., 2023, this issue), family formation practices (Ottlewski et al., 2023, this issue), and fitness body culture (Schöps et al., 2023, this issue), this collection of papers paves the way for a more expansive application of the theoretical framework of platformization of consumer culture to previously underexplored areas, underscoring promising directions for future research.

Furthermore, the papers in this collection broaden our understanding of platformization by blending an interest for the platformized world with specific geographical contexts and phenomena. The special issue ranges from exploring consumer activism practices within the Greek context (Vrikki and Lekakis, 2023, this issue), to analyzing a consumer-initiated platform operating in Switzerland, Germany and Austria (Ottlewski et al., 2023, this issue), to understanding the processes of curating a consumption ideology in the context of US gun culture (Drenten et al., 2023, this issue). Future research could further expand the analysis of the platformization of consumer culture to a global perspective that goes beyond Western scenarios. Moreover, exploring the interplay between global and local dimensions of platformization could offer valuable insights into the evolving landscape of consumer culture.

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